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THE MIMETIC ASPECT OF THE MOCKER'S SONG

By DONALD R. DICKEY

WITH FOUR PHOTOGRAPHS BY THE AUTHOR

OBSERVATION of the tender age at which mockingbirds (*Mimus polyglottos*) attain a varied and "imitative" song has led the author into a train of thought and to a tentative hypothesis that falls admittedly in the class of sheer speculation. As such, however, it has interested me, and a brief note in that connection is therefore submitted to CONDOR readers. Its intent is purely suggestive. If it serves no other purpose, it may help to check the loose finality with which the mimetic character of this bird's song is popularly ascribed to pure and simple mockery. If the anthropomorphic attitude is steadfastly set aside, there remains a serious doubt in my mind as to whether this loose, popular acceptance is scientifically tenable.

On October 14, 1921, A. J. van Rossem collected an immature male Western Mockingbird which had just completed the post-juvinal moult (no. J 1452, collection of Donald R. Dickey). When taken, it was successfully "imitating" the notes of the Sparrow Hawk, Killdeer, and Cactus Wren. The rendition of these calls, together with the more characteristic mockingbird interludes, was so fluent and skillful as to convince the listener that he was hearing an old performer. The very few months which had actually elapsed since this youngster first saw light would seem to form all too short a period for the purely imitative acquisition of so varied a repertoire. May not generations of usage have made this ability an inherent rather than a mimetic characteristic?

Disregard for a moment the original manner in which the vocal versatility of the species was evolved, for in any event that is lost to us in the unrecorded past. Is it folly to suggest that the "imitative" portion of this particular individual's repertoire was as inherent and hereditary in his breast as were the true mockingbird phrases? There is a strong suspicion in my mind that if this bird had been transplanted as a nestling to a favorable habitat on which the note of Sparrow Hawk, or Killdeer, or Cactus Wren, had never fallen, he would yet have greeted approaching maturity with "imitations" of their songs. In other words, may this not be a case of parallel ability and adventitious similarity rather than actual and individual mimicry?

"But," observers will say, "we have actually heard the cries of unrelated species taken up and repeated by mockingbirds!" True, but is this not

the result of stimulus rather than tutelage,—induced parallelism, rather than true mimesis? We have all heard bird notes that resembled those of insects which were vocal at the same time and place, but we do not suggest that one learned from the other! The sound of the rattlesnake has no connection with

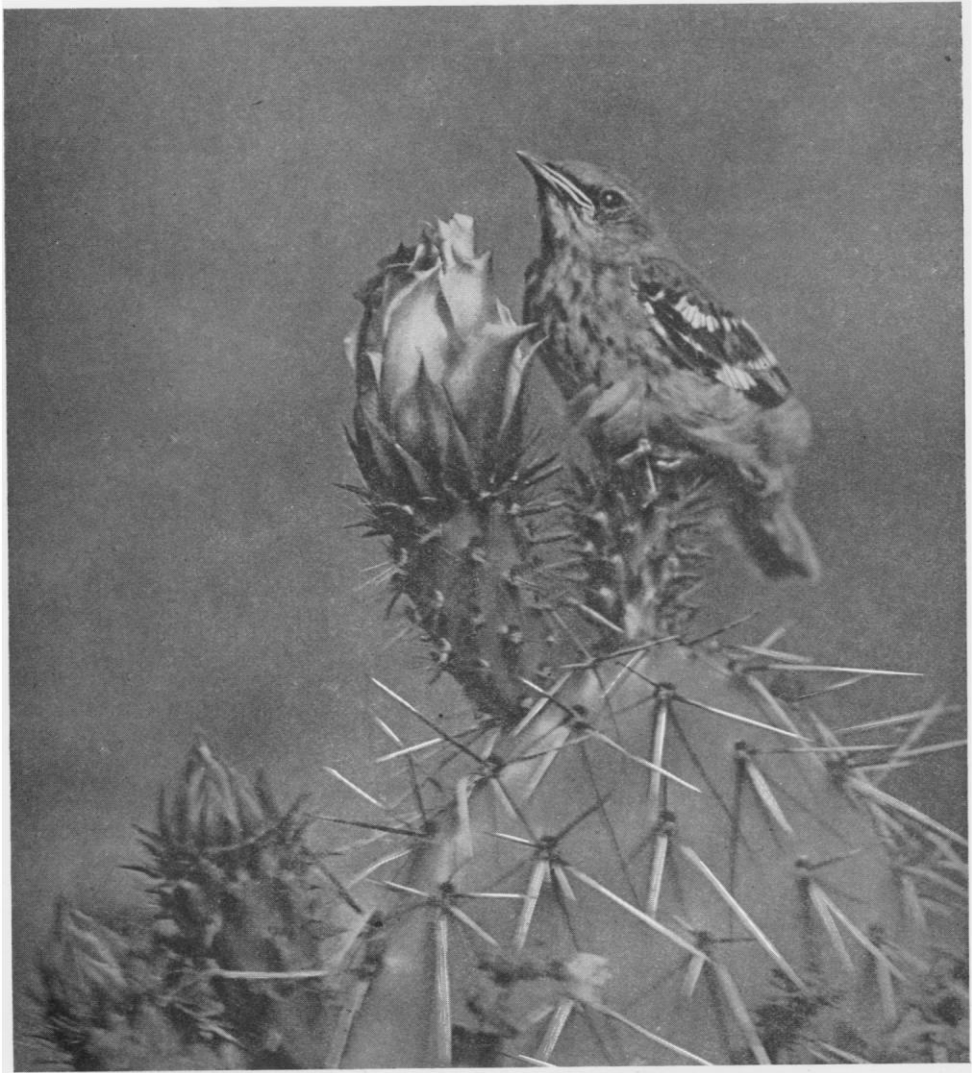


Fig. 35. NESTLING MOCKER; SAN CLEMENTE ISLAND.

that of the “rattle-weed” save in similarity, and sometimes fortuitous propinquity. Admit that the insect vocalization *might* activate the Grasshopper Sparrow, the weed *might* activate the rattler,—then, by the same token, the Killdeer *might* activate, but not teach, the mockingbird. We have all seen a frisky calf set a sedate plow horse to gamboling in the same pasture, yet no

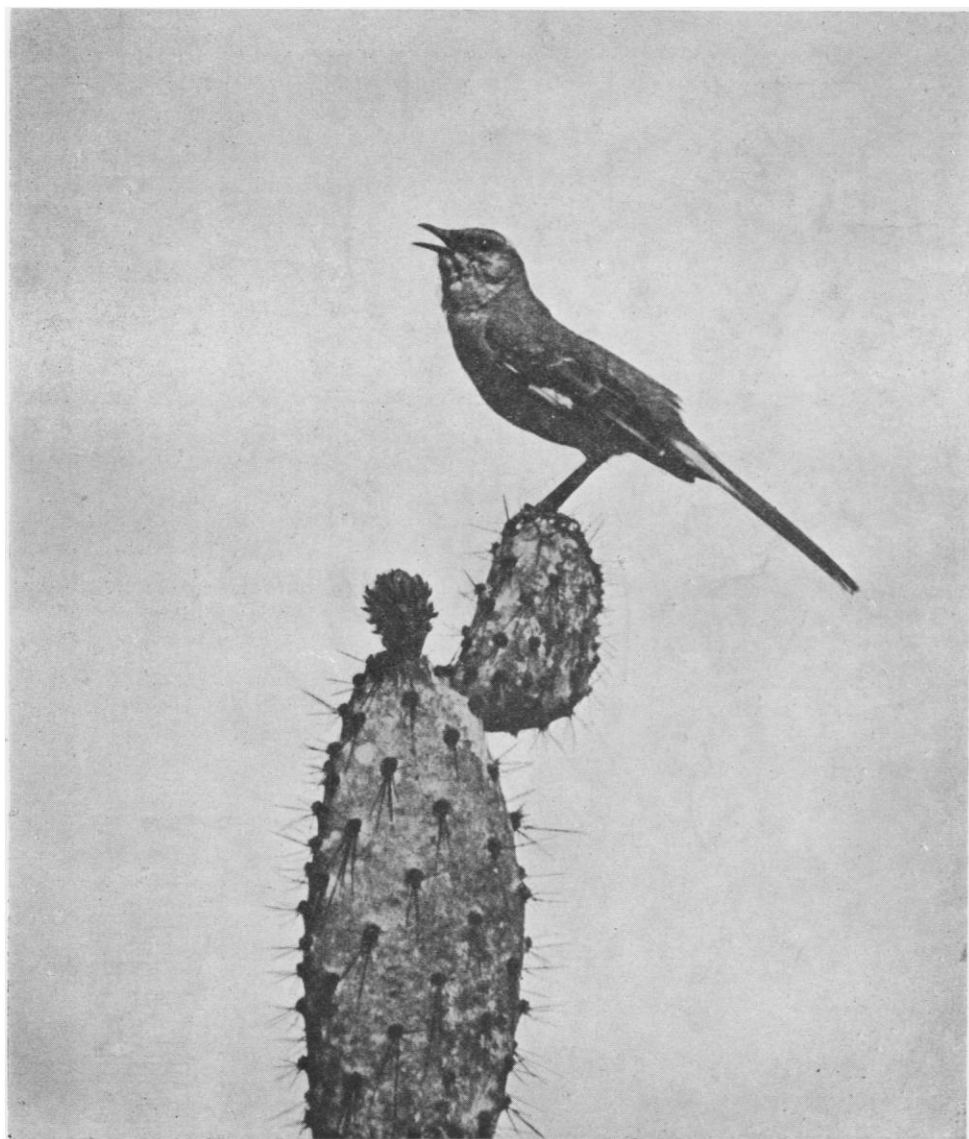


Fig. 36. THE MOCKER'S SONG.

one would suggest that old Dobbin had *learned* his sportive capers from the newborn calf. The latter furnishes a stimulus to similar activity, and nothing more.

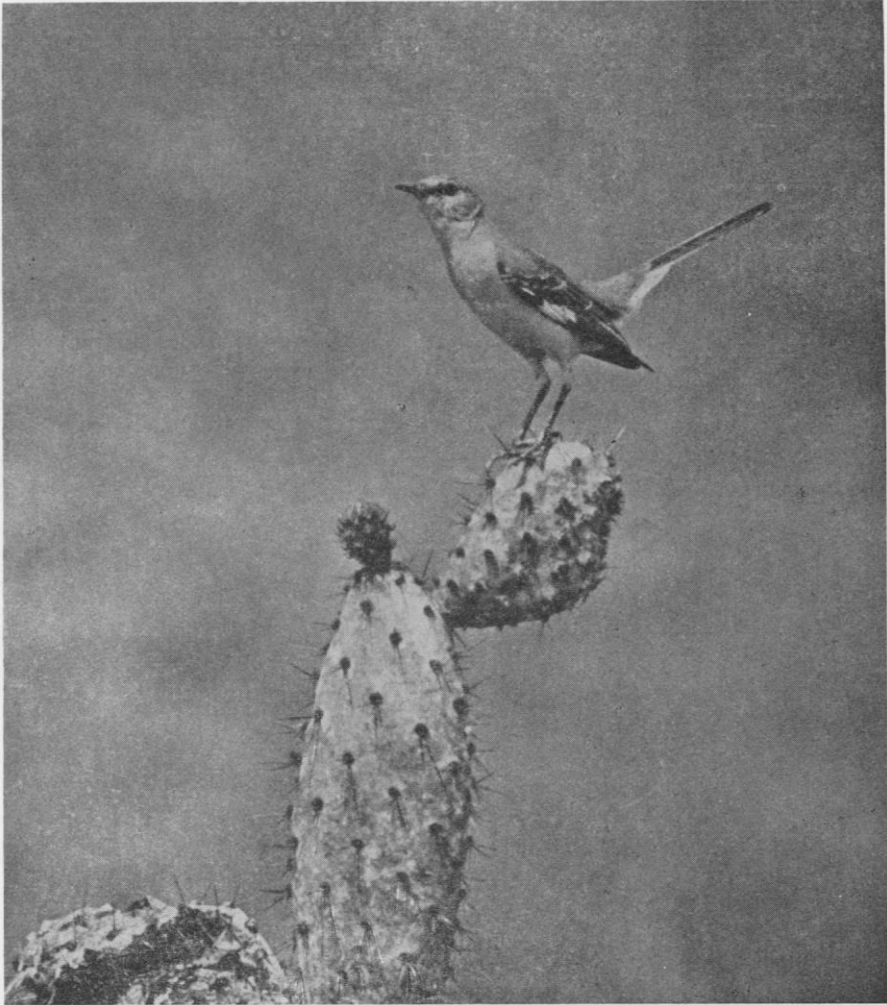


Fig. 37. THE WESTERN MOCKINGBIRD; SAN CLEMENTE ISLAND.

Experience with cage birds may be urged against this perhaps fanciful hypothesis, for "teachers" are employed, I believe, to develop the maximum purity of tone and variety of song in "roller" canaries. But, is not this purely for the purpose of attaining ultra-refinement? Every child has an inherent

capacity for running and jumping of a very creditable sort, yet a pacemaker is necessary to develop a winning athlete in an Olympic track meet. In summing up, then, no claim is made that the perfection of a mocker's so-called "imitation" is attained without examples to copy—without oral assistance—but the suggestion is made that the basic phrases of a mockingbird's vocabu-



FIG. 38. NEST OF THE WESTERN MOCKER, IN TUNIS CACTUS.

lary which simulate the notes of other birds may well be as intrinsic a part of his transmitted vocal ability as are those other interludes which have no analogies among other species.

Pasadena, California, June 7, 1922.